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Frustrated Feminisms: Hippolyta on Screenⁱ

By Nicholas Tobin Roth



f all Shakespeare's comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has generated by far the most film versions. In this article I focus on three major recent productions: Elijah Moshinsky's telefilm for the BBC (1981) and two feature films directed by Adrian Noble (1996) and Michael Hoffman (1999) respectively.ⁱⁱ A good deal of critical attention has already been paid to these films, and the focus of this paper is to comparatively close-read one local issue across each of them: their various representations of the character Hippolyta. It is a commonplace that film adaptations of plays have open to them medium-specific techniques not available to live theater (and of course vice-versa), and many film versions of the *Dream* have capitalized on this in order to more fully develop Hippolyta's character. What is at stake in emphasizing the role of this seemingly minor character? What are the politics of her representation? This paper argues for a trend in these three adaptations:ⁱⁱⁱ that while the beefing up of Hippolyta's character seems, at first glance, to promote a so-called "progressive" agenda of recuperating the character as the powerful symbol of woman's strength and independence that her name connotes, in fact something much more heteronormative might be going on.

In choosing to focus specifically on filmic representations of Hippolyta, I am to some degree following Kathryn Schwarz, who makes note of the (relatively) recent increase in critical attention the character has received in studies of Shakespeare's plays. Schwarz notes: "Sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, Hippolyta, whose lines make up less than 2 percent of the play began to speak for the play" (205). Less attention, however, has been paid to Hippolyta's recent filmic representations, even though a critical focus on the character is clearly not without good reason. Hippolyta's prominence in the play's opening and closing scenes, her potential doubling with Titania in the play's middle acts,^{iv} and the thematic resonances of the sexual anxieties bound up in her

character throughout the play – all these mark her clearly as a central figure of the text, even if she is confined to its peripheries.

The combination of Hippolyta's prominence and relative silence – her productive near-muteness – generates multiple plausible interpretations for her staging, and the pronounced ambivalence in her scant lines has caused critics to imagine the character anywhere from placid and submissive to aggressively discontented. Harold Brooks, in his introduction to the Arden edition (1979), stands at the former extreme (along with Schanzer and others) and suggests that Theseus "is an ardent lover, and in her reply Hippolyta reciprocates his love" (lxxxix). Brooks' note to Theseus' "what cheer, my love?" (1.1.122), is likewise dismissive of any discord on Hippolyta's part: "She is downcast," Brooks asserts, "at the ill-omen, intruding upon the joyous preparations for her wedding, of love threatened with death or a compelled celibacy." For Brooks then, Hippolyta's potential sadness is trivial, and it is a consequence not of grievances against Theseus, but indeed of the "omen" that might hinder her happy marriage with him. Until recently, this sort of concordant reading seems to have dominated film adaptations, in which Hippolyta is variously marginalized or any discordance on her part is trivialized into something like "homesickness." See, for example, Max Reinhardt's in 1935, Joan Kemp-Welch's in 1964, Peter Hall's in 1969, and Joseph Papp's in 1982.

More recently, critics have noted that Hippolyta's dialogue is potentially much more complicated than the picture painted by Brooks, and that the frame-tale of the conquered amazonian queen leads to a much more problematic constellation of sexual anxieties.^v Some critics have also hedged their bets by suggesting that while Hippolyta's attitude in the first act is open to interpretation as variously concordant or discordant, she has clearly been interpellated as a happy submissive wife by the fifth act.^{vi} Frankly, here I beg to differ. Hippolyta's banter with Theseus during the mechanicals' play makes this clear:

HIP: How chance Moonshine is gone, before Thisbe comes back and finds
her lover?

THE: She will find him by Starlight.

(Enter THISBE)

Here she comes, and her passion ends the play.

HIP: Methinks she should not use a long one for such a Pyramus; I hope
she will be brief. (5.1.300-5)

These are Hippolyta's final lines in the play, and embedded within this apparently innocuous side-banter she manages to make not only a nostalgic reference to the moon – an allusion both to Diana, the virgin goddess of the hunt, and to the moon-shaped shield often ascribed to amazonian warriors – but also a cynical remark about monogamous heterosexual romantic love: while Hippolyta might be suggesting that Thisbe restrain her passion for this specific Pyramus, she might also very well be registering her impatience with a play that represents any woman with any Pyramus. In any case, Hippolyta seems to find in Thisbe a point of identification in the mechanicals' play that other ladies of the court might find given discomfiting given Thisbe's obvious masculinity. Hippolyta, who has potentially eschewed a typical conception of feminine identity, has no such problem here.^{vii} Elsewhere her evocations of amazonian mythology are less subtle: her allusions to the "silver bow" and to her experiences with Hercules and Cadmus, for example, or the fact that in a mere thirty-one lines of dialogue she manages to mention the moon five times. As often as the play's adaptors have thought to contain any discord on the part of Hippolyta by the end of the *Dream*, the potential is clearly there to think her a disquieting presence that consistently points toward the undercurrent of misogynistic violence that inscribes the play's textual fabric.

Louis Adrian Montrose has most effectively described how the deep nexus of anxieties embodied in the figure of Hippolyta clearly branch out into the rest of the play. He argues, "Representations of the Amazons are ubiquitous in Elizabethan texts" (70), and they constitute a "cultural fantasy... that precisely inverts European norms of political authority, sexual license, marriage practices, and inheritance rules" (71). In turn, "The festive conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, its celebration of romantic and generative heterosexual union, depends upon the success of a process whereby female pride and power manifested in misanthropic warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wives and willful daughters are brought under the control of husbands and lords" (76). With this in mind, it's easy to understand why filming Hippolyta seems to be such a fraught enterprise.

Michael Hoffman's film, set in the nineteenth-century Italian countryside and populated with a cast of Hollywood A-listers (Michelle Pfeiffer, Kevin Kline, Calista Flockhart, etc.), has attracted particular critical attention for its flagrantly problematic gender politics. Courtney Lehmann and Stephen M. Buhler have both done an excellent job rendering the telling sexual anxieties latent in Hoffman's adaptation. Lehmann condemns it as a failed "pop-feminist" (266) film that in effect "dramatize[s] female careerism as a variation on the virgin/whore theme" (262), and Buhler argues that it is simply a failed attempt at "gender inoffensiveness," so that any dialogue that might invoke anxieties is simply cut from the film altogether: Theseus' famous pseudo-apology for wooing Hippolyta with his sword, for example, or Hippolyta's lines about Hercules and Cadmus, and even the wonderful image of female homosociality in Helena's beautiful speech to Hermia where she likens their friendship to "two lovely berries molded on one stem" (3.2.203-14). Sophie Marceau (at her most prim and demure) plays Hippolyta throughout as a submissive, concordant, reconciled wife – except, notably, for one moment. In Act IV, when Theseus and his train have stumbled upon the lovers (who, in Hoffman's version, are lying naked together at the edge of the forest), Hippolyta takes Theseus aside for a brief moment of whispering in which, we are lead to believe, she convinces him to show mercy to the four lovers. Here, we are, I think, supposed to get a sense of her strength and value as an independent woman – but it is painfully too little, too late. That said, this attempt at a sort of feminism, even if it *were* successful, would still elide the anxieties attendant on her radically anti-marriage amazonian background for the sake of a sanitized investment in equal marriage rights.

Witness the Moshinsky and Noble versions. Both attempt to recuperate Hippolyta's feminist potential, and both end up in ideological trade-offs that jettison the profound cultural anxieties embedded in the figure of the Queen of the Amazons in order to effect a much safer kind of feminism. Moshinsky's 1981 adaptation for the BBC and Time-Life is fairly straightforward, sticking closely to Shakespeare's text and, for the most part, following traditional interpretations of the play. And while it is, I think, a good adaptation with some excellent performances, it hasn't received as much recent critical attention certainly as the Reinhardt or Hoffman, but probably not even as much as Noble's or Edzard's. Moshinsky's *Dream* opens on a close-up of Hippolyta's face

(played by a brazen Estelle Kohler): her anxious demeanor, complemented by her tremendously frizzed-out hair, quickly transforms into outright anger as Theseus enters the room. As she turns, we cut to a wide shot that aligns Hippolyta and Theseus against each other in a face-off, with their respective trains backing them up as if preparing for battle. As Theseus vainly attempts to soothe her, they move into an intensely intimate two-shot, and Hippolyta speaks her four scant lines with stinging venom, a deep resentment that is perhaps tinged with homesickness and self-pity, but nevertheless clearly threatens Theseus' authority. This level of defiance in Hippolyta's opening lines is unique among all the major film versions of the *Dream*. Indeed, it is so defiant that Moshinsky himself subsequently feels compelled, as C.W. Griffin notes, to defy both the text and "ordinary theatrical practice" (44) by cutting Hippolyta out of the rest of the scene entirely. Halfway through what would be Act One, Scene One, the scene switches to another room, where Egeus, Lysander, Demetrius and Hermia have come to seek Theseus' ducal decree. Hippolyta is conspicuously absent.

While on one hand, we might make a lot of this absence and link it to Hippolyta's weighty silences, I think it more plausible to understand this moment as evidence that the presence of a totally defiant Hippolyta in this scene would be potentially too uncomfortable to bear. But, notably, it would not be unwarranted by the text, even if here it would almost certainly hinder the already tenuous sense of transformation that makes Hippolyta, in Moshinsky's fifth act, a smiling and seemingly willing bride. By the mechanicals' performance, Hippolyta is placidly content, and though she is, for a moment, slightly dismayed at seeing "wretchedness o'er-charg'd" (5.1.85), Theseus quickly soothes her cares and she returns to her former giggling self. She discharges her remaining lines earnestly; this Hippolyta truly pities Bottom's Pyramus, and her witty criticisms are portrayed as genuine confusions. Tellingly, her declaration, "I am weary of this moon. Would he would change!" (5.1.242) is cut, as are her pivotal final lines about Thisbe's passion (5.1.304-305). This is only a slight improvement over Hoffman's Hippolyta, who is not only deprived of nearly all her lines in Act Five, but actually falls asleep during the mechanicals' performance, though she wakes up in time to, improbably, cry at Thisbe's final speech. In other words, if the opening of Moshinsky's *Dream* has gone as far as seems reasonable in the way of making Hippolyta a defiant and discordant

Amazon, then the end of the film has gone equally far in the other direction, to subdue and neutralize these anxieties.

Noble's *Dream*, on the other hand, not only makes Hippolyta (Lindsay Duncan) discordant, but in many ways allows that discord to resonate throughout the film. Noble's is the most "theatrical"^{viii} of these adaptations in its foregrounding of its own stagey artificiality and its appropriation of theater conventions. For example, it is the only prominent adaptation of the *Dream* to borrow the common theatrical practice of doubling Hippolyta and Titania, as well as Theseus and Oberon, with the same actors. The injustice of phallocratic authority visited upon Hippolyta is thus carried through to Oberon's mistreatment of Titania, and we are never allowed to forget the sexual anxieties and erotic violences that run throughout the work, nor that Hippolyta/Titania is in many ways the figurehead for these anxieties, nor that this psychic violence will be visited on the young boy, the surrogate for the audience that constitutes Noble's most profound addition to the play-text. Noble's version opens with this young boy, who, having fallen asleep reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, wakes up in the night and, through a keyhole, spies the back of Hippolyta's head and hears the imploring voice of Theseus speaking to her. Noble's Hippolyta is at first unabashedly enamored and sexually desirous of Theseus, but this quickly changes when Egeus begins exercising his phallocratic power over Hermia. Throughout their argument, we get multiple cut-aways to Hippolyta, whose anger at Theseus is palpable, and, as it becomes clearer that he intends to side with Egeus and uphold the father's ownership of the daughter's body, Hippolyta becomes increasingly irate. As her mounting anger crescendos, she slaps Theseus in the face, at which point his dominating authority is utterly undermined, and he flees the room mumbling the remainder of his lines to himself.

In some ways then, this should be the most progressively feminist of the film versions I have been discussing. For not only does Hippolyta stand up to Theseus so clearly with that most contestatory act of physical violence, the slap-in-the-face, but also this image of feminine strength in the face of patriarchal injustice echoes throughout the film in the form of Duncan's double-role as Titania. Noble clearly stages the *Dream* as being *about* sexual violence and its accompanying cultural anxieties, rendering the forest as a surreal sort of dreamland and playing up its sexual thematics (notably of the Puck

and Bottom characters). But while at first glance this depiction of Hippolyta as an empowered woman registers as a sort of progressive feminism, this sort of representation of the character ignores another important connotation that her name (and range of allusions – to the moon, the silver bow, Hercules and Cadmus, etc.) makes clear: as Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta represents the figurehead of a truly matriarchal, totally gynocentric society that stands in radical opposition not only to the patriarchal marriage economy common to both Elizabethan England and contemporary western society, but to any idea of marriage at all. Thus, to depict Hippolyta as sympathetic with Hermia's plight – and Noble is certainly not alone in locating her anger at Theseus less in her own subjugation than in her advocacy for Hermia to marry whomever she chooses – is to imbricate her in an ideology of monogamous romantic love and equal marriage rights that neutralizes the threat posed by the myth of a radically anti-marriage Amazonian queen. One sort of progressive feminism is effectively jettisoned to make room for another, more retrograde feminism. If Hippolyta's discordance has to do only with Egeus's maltreatment of Hermia and not with her own subjection, then all the weight of amazonian mythology effectively evaporates.

Stunningly, for a film that seems so willing to delve into the most uncomfortable aspects of Shakespeare's work, these anxieties are foreclosed in Noble's fully and traditionally comedic ending: in Act Five Hippolyta retains no trace of her former dissenting self, kissing Theseus' hands during the mechanicals' performance and smiling lasciviously as he declares it "bedtime." In other words, even if this film is willing to let many of the most disquieting aspects of the play linger at the end (for example, Titania's trace of recognition of Bottom from her dream-tryst with him in donkey-form reminds us quite tangibly in the play's closing moments of the specters of rape and bestiality), even then, playing up Hippolyta's amazonian connotations would apparently go too far. It is not totally surprising then, that Noble's Hippolyta is dressed in the same sort of minimal pajama-like costuming as the other characters, without any marker of her amazonian heritage.

On one hand, this might suggest that the anxieties we have about love and marriage are even more deeply imbedded, and consequently more troubling, than those which concern the equality of women. Maybe. I'm less convinced of this, however, than I

am of the idea that these are simply two separate ideological constellations that, in the context of adapting this play, precipitate a binary choice: you can either be progressive in one way or the other, but the option to do both is foreclosed by the structure of the play itself. This in turn speaks to the larger, more general concern that I'm getting at here with this notion of what I'm calling an ideological trade-off, or, perhaps, an ideological see-saw effect. This phenomena, to my knowledge, has not been explicitly theorized or examined at length in these terms: it seems as if, often enough, certain artistic works, in the attempt at so-called progressive treatments of gender and sexuality – or race, or class – sacrifice their own criteria for what constitutes “progressive” in a different ideological category, perhaps in order to appeal to larger audiences. The question might be stated thus: with a work that, for example, does progressive ideological work in terms of gender, are their certain attendant consequences on how that work deals with, say, race or class? And if not, then what makes certain works idiosyncratic in that they seem to sacrifice one sort of counter-hegemonic work in the attempt to accomplish another?

Surprisingly, there is one film version of the *Dream* that does delve into the deep anxieties evoked by amazonian mythology. However, it is a film version which was never filmed. The original script for Max Reinhardt's 1935 *Dream* differs substantially from the final product in several important regards. Notably, it includes a shot-by-shot breakdown of a different opening of the film, one that details the battle between Athens and the Amazons in which Theseus defeats Hippolyta. This would have lent a very different tone to the ensuing scene, where, fascinatingly, Reinhardt has added an interesting stage direction. Upon learning Theseus' harsh sentence,

Hippolyta suddenly bursts out laughing
and Theseus looks at her wonderingly.

THESEUS

What cheer, my love?

Hippolyta continues laughing. (qtd. in Jackson 39)

What would it do to the film to graphically witness Theseus conquering Hippolyta, then have her laugh maniacally at him a moment later? There are many ways we might read this idiosyncratic direction, but in any case this laughter would give us a drastically

different sense of her character, one that would make it more difficult to believe her investment in Hermia's struggle to decide whom she marries. Rather, we might have had a Hippolyta committed to the absurdity of her gloomy fate, and the shadow cast across the *Dream* as a whole would be one that calls into question not only issues of marriage rights, but of the institutions of love, romance, monogamy and marriage in general.

Notes

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ⁱⁱ Other notable versions include Max Reinhardt's grandiose and seminal adaptation (1935), Vitagraph's *Silent Shakespeare* (1909), and Joseph Papp's notable filmed stage production (1982), as well as adaptations directed by Joan Kemp-Welch (1964), Peter Hall (1968), and Christine Edzard, whose *The Children's Midsummer Night's Dream* (2001) is cast entirely with actors aged between nine and twelve. There are also many adaptations in foreign languages, and a great number of films that are more loosely inspired by Shakespeare's play, such as Woody Allen's *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982) and, more recently, the unintentionally hilarious and campy teen comedies, Tommy O'Haver's *Get Over It* (2001) and Gil Cates Jr.'s *Midsummer Night's Rave* (2002). I myself cannot claim to have seen every cinematic adaptation of the play, despite my efforts to obtain a copy of the pornographic "bardcore" classic, *A Midsummer Night's Cream* (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ I use the term "adaptation" loosely here, to designate films of the same title that more-or-less follow the text of Shakespeare's play. It might be more useful to think of how these films variously "borrow from" or "intersect with" the Bard's text (to use Dudley Andrew's terms), but a careful theorizing of modes of adapting Shakespeare is beyond the scope of this paper. See Jorgens' early study on this topic, as well as Michael Anderegg's essay in James Naremore's *Film Adaptation* for another excellent study in this line. I should also point out here that film versions of the *Dream* overwhelmingly favor the First Quarto (I haven't yet found one that uses the Folio), in line with the vast majority of the play's editors. See Hodgdon for an argument in favor of the Folio, especially concerning the presence of Egeus in Act Five. An analysis of how this might affect the representation of Hippolyta would potentially be interesting, but necessarily quite speculative; in adapting the play, filmmakers often alter the Quarto in ways much more drastic than accounted for by the differences between the Quarto and the Folio, so even if the Folio was used, there would be tremendous room to shape the representation of Hippolyta in Act Five in all sorts of ways, Egeus' presence not withstanding.

^{iv} A typical move in theatrical productions of the *Dream* is to have the same pair of actors play Hippolyta and Theseus as play Titania and Oberon.

^v cf. Schwarz; Buccola; Buhler; Lehmann; Pearson; Montrose.

^{vi} cf. Griffin.

^{vii} The problematics of yoking Thisbe's cross-dressing to Hippolyta's amazonian roots should not be overlooked. Suffice it to say here that both stand outside dominant gender norms, albeit in quite different ways.

^{viii} cf. Jorgens, 7-10, for a not-unproblematic but still-somewhat-useful taxonomy of Shakespearean film adaptations as variously "theatrical," "realistic," and "filmic."

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